Reflection: Feast of Mary Magdala

St. Ignatius Church
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There is an instinct in the human person, I think, that at times presumes we know with certitude what makes a person tick or that we know the full rhyme and reason of a situation – even if we don’t or can’t. I suppose it’s our need to feel securely grounded in truth, our longing to be sure footed as we walk through this life.

Bill Cosby, the quirky comedian, captured something of this in a monologue he did years ago. He was bothered by how routinely people at a wake would pay their respects to the departed with comments like, “Doesn’t he look like himself?” “So natural...” He protested that if someone looked like that as the person lay asleep on the couch in front of the TV, you’d scream, “Oh my God, he’s dead!” Well it bugged him enough that he decided to make his point the next time he had the opportunity. Sure enough, Joe, a neighborhood pal and a familiar presence on the street, died peacefully in his sleep. As expected, the neighbors turned up at the local funeral home. But this time, as they filed by the casket whispering the familiar mantra, “Doesn’t he look like himself,” a voice came from underneath Joe’s head, “Hello, Bill, how’re the wife and kids? Don’t I look like myself?” Of course, all pandemonium broke loose!

It’s a silly story but how often and in how many varied ways we act and speak out of such certitude and quick judgment only to discover that we’ve missed the mystery of it all.

What Mary Magdalene teaches is quite different for, in her refusal to be imprisoned by any one label or category, she teaches us the profound truth that each person is ultimately a mystery. And so we ask, who IS this Mary Magdalene?

For some, like the two gospel writers, Mark and Luke, she was the woman possessed by seven demons but nowhere is prostitution named as one of the demons as popular belief and some church teachings have posited. Popular knowledge identifies Mary Magdalene as the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried them with her hair and anointed them with precious oil. Yet, even though all four gospels mention the incident, not one writer identifies the woman as Mary Magdalene.

What is solidly established in all four gospels is that Mary Magdalene was a witness at the crucifixion. She, the apostle to the apostles, was the first witness of the resurrection, and for three of the evangelists, she was there when they buried her beloved Jesus.

What we uncover, as we peel back the layers of who we have come to identify as the real Mary Magdalene, is someone quite different from the voluptuous, sinful prostitute so often attributed to her. No, she was the one who remained steadfastly in horror as they killed her beloved. She was the one, this apostle to the apostles, who ran to tell the others that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. She was the one who told what she was given to see, even though others refused to believe her. And when Peter and John saw the empty tomb, they left, thinking perhaps that they had arrived at the end of the story.
But Mary stayed outside the tomb, weeping, lingering, keeping vigil in the face of the mystery she was encountering. Her love for her beloved Jesus must have whispered to her that there was MORE….always more. And then the gardener appeared, and then her name was spoken, and then heart met heart and the Mystery of Love that will never die unfolded before her eyes: “Rabbouni.”

Isn’t this what Mary Magdala teaches us? Isn’t this, too, our call: to linger, to keep vigil as the face of Mystery is gradually revealed, whether it be the mystery of another person, or the mystery of ourselves, or the Mystery of God. We will not know the end of the story until the end. Love teaches us that there is always More to be seen and to be understood.

How sad that we close the book before it’s time by putting labels on people, by casting each other as “we” and “they”, by remaining oblivious to the Mystery that we and the whole universe are all made of the same stuff and that what happens to the smallest particle affects all of creation.

No less true is the inscrutable Mystery of God and the unbelievable mystery that God is as close to us and we to God as our skin. When we go to our human depths, we find God. And when we go to the depths of God, we find ourselves. Walter Macken said it so beautifully in one volume of his trilogy, *Seek the Fairlands*:

“Strange, he thought, the places in yourself that you don’t know about, the deep places inside you that can be weeping all the time that your mouth is talking or laughing. The inside of you is like a well, a deep well about which you know very little. That must be your soul, where all the real things take place. And if it is a right deep place, and has been tended by your head, then he supposed that God would be deep down in there whispering to you always about the realities. So that would be the real fair land, deep down in yourself.”

And so we keep vigil for Mystery as Mary did. Like the woman in the moving passage from the Song of Songs, the very absence of our Beloved, the hiddenness and obscurity of the full unveiling of the mystery of another, simply impels us to run through the streets and city squares, in the face of social convention and even personal safety, guided only by love’s fire that will not be quenched until we come home to Mystery, to Love itself. It is this obedience to the endlessly unfolding mystery of self, of others, of God that Mary teaches us.

And so we come to this table where we are one, where we join each other in our common search. We need each other to sustain the journey. We need to inspire each other to let the Spirit cultivate in us humble searching spirits. In the words of another Mary, the wonderful poet Mary Oliver:

*Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous to be understood*  
*How grass can be nourishing in the mouths of lambs*
How rivers and stones are forever in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.

How people come, from delight or the scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers
Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” And laugh with astonishment,
and bow their heads.

(Evidence)

And so we bow our heads and pray…